



Ecosystem Workforce Program

BRIEFING PAPER
NUMBER 63
SUMMER 2015



“CALL WHEN NEEDED”: PRIVATE CONTRACTING FOR WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION IN AN UNPREDICTABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

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The U.S. Forest Service is facing unprecedented challenges in wildfire suppression, and increasingly depends on resources outside the agency to maintain adequate wildfire response capacity. Reliance on private wildfire suppression contractors has increased over time, especially in bolstering capacity for direct attack resources, such as aerial resources, firefighter hand crews and other equipment. However, little is known about private contracting businesses, in particular how they navigate the same fundamental challenge: to maintain and grow their businesses that directly depend on unpredictable fire seasons and agency needs. This briefing paper reports findings from a case study in southern Oregon, as part of a larger project investigating the role of private wildfire suppression contracting on national forests.

Approach

We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with federal and state agency personnel and private contractors involved in wildfire suppression contracting in southern Oregon (Jackson, Josephine and Klamath counties), focusing on how businesses are operating in unpredictable private contracting markets.

Results

The private contracting industry began in the Pacific Northwest in the 1970's, particularly after the 1971 Oregon Forest Practices Act required heightened fuel reduction and reforestation in the forests. Wildfire suppression often started as a secondary focus for businesses primarily focused on fuels reduction and reforestation. Since then, private businesses and agencies have worked to further develop the industry by developing contracting systems, aligning agency and business standards for firefighter training and equipment specifications, and creating wildfire suppression-oriented businesses.

In this case study we focused on “call when needed” contracting, which means contractors are only called if needed for a specific wildfire incident. Because need is subject to the type, timing, location, and intensity of wildfires each season, contractors must risk upfront investments to ensure their crews and equipment meet agreement and contract requirements with no guarantee that they will be called. Suppression contracting businesses must balance these investments with uncertain demand to remain viable through both busy and slow wildfire seasons. Our research found that private contractors are employing multipronged strategies to navigate this unpredictable marketplace.

Contractors buffer from unpredictable demand by diversifying services. The more a private business aligns with providing wildfire support exclusively, the less buffered they are from the volatility of wildfire seasons. To address this, contractors are diversifying when, where and how equipment and crews can be used.



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Some contractors are primarily focused on other natural resource and conservation work, such as thinning and prescribed burning, and secondarily conduct wildfire suppression work. Others engage in many types of work, such as snowplowing in the winter, which can use existing wildfire equipment. There are far more equipment than hand crew contractors, largely because equipment can be used for other non-fire purposes (e.g. forestry), whereas hand crews often require amplified business risk and investment to set up and maintain. In some cases contractors are cross-training hand crews to conduct activities that can be conducted in the “shoulder seasons” around wildfire, and some contractors have expanded work geography by contracting for fires across the US, which extends their season to include eastern spring and fall fire seasons in addition to western summer-fall fires. These approaches can improve businesses’ bottom line, and also increase the length of employment and aid in employee retention.

Contractors rely on relationships to access opportunities and support. Contractors and agency personnel alike noted the importance of established preseason relationships between agencies and contractors. These relationships can: help familiarize dispatch with local resources, help businesses respond to resource solicitations and preseason agreements, align private crew training specifications with agency standards, and create clear communication channels for efficient resource dispatch and decision-making. Contractors described operating in a professional manner that built trust and credibility with others on the fire line as an integral business approach.

Similarly, contractors emphasized relationships and support in their local communities and employees. Typically, contractors live and work in the places they protect with suppression services. Contractors reported that buying supplies locally when possible, and supporting the communities where they and their employees live are foundational to their business strategy. Similarly, contractors described their relationships with employees as tight-knit, family-like connections, which are

critical for crew safety on the fire line as well as employee accountability and retention.

Contractors are increasing collaboration and communication to facilitate support and enhanced learning. Contractors emphasized the importance of continued work to improve private contracting systems in policies, processes, and relationships. They noted the importance of the nonprofit National Wildfire Suppression Association (NWSA, <http://nwsa.publishpath.com>), which represents over 150 private wildfire services contractors. NWSA was created by private suppression contracting businesses to offer a support structure for contractors, including training certification, networking, education, cohesive messaging, and advocacy. It serves as a venue for bolstering business success by providing a vehicle for private contractors across the nation to coalesce around key issues impacting their businesses, learn from each other, and advocate beyond their individual businesses.

Implications

As wildfire suppression needs continue to grow, agencies will increasingly depend on “call when needed” resources. The stability and effectiveness of such resources hinges on private contractors’ ability to align their business with agency need, and federal agencies’ understanding of how their contracting decisions impact private business. Alongside wildfire suppression needs that continue to advance and evolve nationally, a continued understanding of how agency dispatch protocols, bid processes, and resource standards impact private contractors should also progress. This understanding can serve to better align agency and private contractor business models in order to ensure that when fire strikes, the resources agencies depend on can be where and when they need them, from businesses sufficiently equipped to weather the uncertain marketplace.

More information

For additional information about this research project please see:

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/managingthemarket>

This research was supported by funding from the Joint Fire Science Program. Photo credit: Fremont-Winema National Forest.